

Good Questions

What are civic and social groups? What purposes have they served?

According to historian Ira Berlin, civic and social groups were “reservoirs of strength” in black communities. These groups have always reflected the circumstances of their members.

- *Mutual Aid Societies*: Formed in the late 1700s. Helped shape how people saw themselves. Protected members from social, economic, and political threats. Supported social change by working to end slavery, later encouraged civil rights activities. Still exist today.
- *Benevolent Societies*: Founded in the 1800s. Aimed to help those in distress, ill, or in need of burial assistance. Offered insurance policies to encourage people to provide for future needs. Provided collective economic cooperation when people needed it most. Still exist today.
- *Self-improvement Associations*: Established before the Civil War. Some stressed temperance; others were literary associations. Brought men and women together, as well as people with different economic resources.
- *Fraternal Organizations*: Groups of college educated men and women pledged to serve African American communities. Promoted individual growth, encouraged intra-racial friendship and high moral conduct and ethics.
- *Civic Groups*: Pledged to remedy community problems. Registered people to vote. Fought civil rights cases in the courts. Trained young people to be good citizens.
- *Social Groups*: Came into being after 1896 when *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized “separate but equal.” Founded to fill a social void. Created opportunities for blacks to entertain themselves in safe environments outside of Jim Crow. Still active today.